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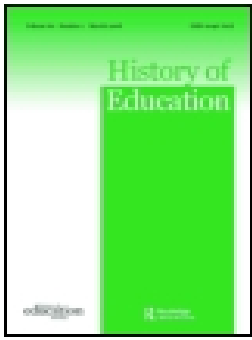
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'History taught in the pageant way': education and historical performance in twentieth-century Britain

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ABSTRACT

Historical pageants were important sites of popular engagement with the past in twentieth-century Britain. They took place in many places and sometimes on a large scale, in settings ranging from small villages to industrial cities. They were staged by schools, churches, professional organisations, women's groups and political parties, among others. This article draws on contemporary studies of heritage and performance to explore the blend of history, myth and fiction that characterised pageants, and the ways in which they both shaped and reflected the self-image of local communities. Pageants were important channels of popular education as well as entertainment and, although they are sometimes seen as backward-looking and conservative spectacles, this article argues that pageants could be an effective means of enlisting the past in the service of the present and future.

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Early twentieth-century Britons succumbed in great number to 'pageant fever' or 'pageantitis'.¹ Hundreds of thousands of people were afflicted by the contagion, giving up their time to participate in historical pageantry as performers, musicians, organisers and fundraisers: casts ran into the thousands. Many more filled grandstands across the country every summer; railway companies arranged special trains to pageant hotspots;² and the local and national press lavished attention on the phenomenon. Pageantry spread right across Britain, from its original cradle in the south and south-west of England, to the far north and islands of Scotland, and to towns, cities and villages almost everywhere in between.³ It enjoyed a nationwide status as a key channel of popular entertainment, community involvement and informal education, and was certainly one of the most important ways in which ordinary people engaged with the past. The study of historical pageants – not just in the 1900s but across the twentieth

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¹Ayako Yoshino, *Pageant Fever: Local History and Consumerism in Edwardian England* (Tokyo: Waseda University Press, 2011).

²Paul Readman, 'The Place of the Past in English Culture', *Past and Present* 186 (2005): 171.

³*Ibid.*, 168–75; Yoshino, *Pageant Fever*; Mark Freeman, "'Splendid Display; Pompous Spectacle": Historical Pageants in Twentieth-Century Britain', *Social History* 38 (2013): 423–55.

century and into the twenty-first – has been the subject of a major project, *The Redress of the Past*, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. In this project we examined scripts, ephemera, press reports, film and the material remains of pageants, as well as conducting a series of oral history interviews with former pageant performers.⁴ *The Redress of the Past* is concerned only with Britain, but the movement took root elsewhere, too, in North America for example, and also in Ireland.⁵

The study of historical pageants contributes to many areas of historiography – including social and cultural history, political history, urban and rural history, gender history, intellectual history and the histories of music, art, costume and performance – as well as linking to theatre studies and the study of English literature.⁶ Pageants can be seen as imperial performances, and as exemplifying the evolution of local and national identities: in Scotland and Wales, unsurprisingly, the historical narratives in pageants were rather different from those performed in England.⁷ Here, however, we consider pageants as an aspect of the history of education, linked to the histories of the communities within which they were performed. Acting in a pageant could be seen, as Jerome de Groot has argued in relation to historical re-enactment, to have a ‘performative educational function’, and pageant organisers were well aware of this.⁸ Pageants were designed to be fun, but they also had an instructive agenda: they aimed to share knowledge about the past. Many, for example, claimed exemption from the entertainments tax levied by HM Customs and Excise between 1916 and 1960 on the grounds that they were educational initiatives aimed at a wide audience.⁹ Some were performed solely or in large part by schoolchildren – individual school pageants were legion – but often children were dragooned into pageantry on an even larger scale. In total, many hundreds of thousands of people, young and old, took part in, and millions of spectators watched, historical pageants in twentieth-century Britain.

In this article we consider pageants as sites of learning: occasions on which heritage was performed with an informal educational purpose. This raises questions about the content and organisation of these events, and about the role of producers and script-writers, performers and audiences. Historians of education have increasingly focused on institutions, groups, individuals and activities beyond the school and university, and on ways in which formal educational institutions have participated in the wider communities of which they are a part; it has been argued that we have seen a partial shift from histories of education to a ‘social history of learners and learning’.¹⁰ Alongside these

⁴*The Redress of the Past: Historical Pageants in Britain 1905–2016* (AHRC award number AH/K003887/1). See the project website at <http://www.historicalpageants.ac.uk> (accessed 8 August 2018). Most of the pageants mentioned in this article appear in the database at <http://www.historicalpageants.ac.uk/pageants> (accessed 8 August 2018), often with a summary of the episodes and an account of the local context. In most cases, full individual references to entries in the database will not be provided in the article.

⁵See David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Joan FitzPatrick Dean, *All Dressed Up Modern Irish Historical Pageantry* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014).

⁶For two recent examples, see Emily Robinson, *The Language of Progressive Politics in Modern Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), chapter 4, esp. 114–15, and Zoë Thomas, ‘Historical Pageants, Citizenship and the Performance of Women’s History before Second-Wave Feminism’, *Twentieth Century British History* 28 (2017): 319–43.

⁷On pageants and empire, see Yoshino, *Pageant Fever*, chapters 3–4. The *Redress of the Past* database contains many Scottish and Welsh pageants.

⁸Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2008), 113.

⁹Freeman, ‘“Splendid Display”’, 425.

¹⁰Gary McCulloch and Tom Woodin, ‘Towards a Social History of Learners and Learning’, *Oxford Review of Education* 36 (2010): 133–40.

developments, though rarely connected with them, has been a growing interest in public history and the ‘uses’ of the past, influenced by Raphael Samuel’s *Theatres of Memory*, which itself engaged with earlier critiques of the ‘heritage industry’.¹¹ Museum and heritage studies have seen a productive exploration of learning in heritage contexts, and this is useful to our analysis here. A substantial study by Anthony Jackson and Jenny Kidd, for example, examines the impact of ‘performance’ in heritage settings on learning, considering the broad – social and experiential – effects of historical dramatisation.¹² For Jackson and Kidd, learning should not be considered ‘solely in terms of the acquisition of factual knowledge’:

Rather ... it is often in more subtle, complex and challenging ways that learning is supported and ‘delivered’ through performance; engagement, empathy, participation, challenge, understanding and taking ownership are also means through which learning may be generated.¹³

We argue here that many of these learning experiences were encountered by pageant performers and spectators in twentieth-century Britain, undermining what Paul Johnson has called ‘the perception of performance as a potentially unpredictable or unruly activity in comparison with the respectable task of learning’.¹⁴ For Johnson, the demands of both history *and* fiction must be met when ‘performing heritage’.¹⁵ In this article we show how pageants straddled the boundaries between fact and fiction, and as a result had an uneasy relationship with academic history. Pageants were both applauded and ridiculed by academic historians, and in some cases explicitly foregrounded entertainment ahead of historical verisimilitude. Nevertheless, we argue, although pageants did attempt in some respects to be faithful to the historical record, their educational value – or indeed the ‘authenticity’ of the past which they presented – should not be judged in these terms. Moreover, the learning experiences acquired through participation in a pageant transcended the historical material that was encountered. Those who took part in pageants created their own meanings of what they saw, heard and experienced.

Historical pageants and popular education in modern Britain

There were precursors to the pageant craze, not least the medieval traditions of pageantry that had featured in tournaments and mystery plays. A more immediate formative influence was the fashion for *tableaux vivants*, such as those staged at Winchester and elsewhere in and around 1901 as part of the celebrations

¹¹Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1996); Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London: Methuen, 1987).

¹²Anthony Jackson and Jenny Kidd, *Performance, Learning and Heritage: Research Report 2008* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), <http://www.plh.manchester.ac.uk/documents/Performance,%20Learning%20&%20Heritage%20-%20Executive%20Summary.pdf>, Learning & Heritage - Executive Summary.pdf (accessed 8 August 2018); see also Anthony Jackson, *Theatre, Education and the Making of Meanings: Art or Instrument?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

¹³Anthony Jackson and Jenny Kidd, ‘Introduction’, in *Performing Heritage: Research Practice and Innovation in Museum Theatre and Live Interpretation*, ed. Anthony Jackson and Jenny Kidd (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 5.

¹⁴Paul Johnson, ‘The Space of “Museum Theatre”: A Framework for Performing Heritage’, in Jackson and Kidd, *Performing Heritage*, 55.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 56.

associated with the 1,000th anniversary, or millenary, of the death of King Alfred the Great.¹⁶ However, the modern pageant movement is usually dated to 1905, when the playwright and theatrical impresario Louis Napoleon Parker organised and produced a community celebration in Sherborne, Dorset, to celebrate the 1,200th anniversary of the foundation of the town.¹⁷ The format was a dramatic re-creation of 11 successive scenes from the history of Sherborne, beginning with the foundation of the town by St Ealdhelm in 705, and ending with the visit of Walter Raleigh in 1593. In between, the pageant depicted the defeat of the Danes, the arrival of Alfred the Great, various events in the medieval history of the monastery and town, the establishment of the almshouses, and the expulsion of the monks in 1539.¹⁸ Staged in June amid the ruins of Sherborne castle, and performed seven times, the pageant featured more than 800 performers, with more than 90 of these taking speaking parts; the temporary grandstand could seat 2,000, and many more sat on the grass to watch, so that a total of some 30,000 people saw the show. An adept self-publicist, Parker styled himself 'pageant-master', a title that was used by others thereafter.¹⁹ Parker became one of the most prolific pageant-masters of the Edwardian period – he staged pageants at Warwick (1906), Bury St Edmunds (1907), Colchester and York (both 1909), for example – but many others followed, including the well-known Shakespearean actor and impresario Frank Benson, who produced the Winchester pageant of 1908, and Frank Lascelles, who was responsible for visually spectacular pageants both in Britain and overseas.²⁰

Many Edwardian pageants were much larger than Parker's initial effort at Sherborne. Benson's Winchester pageant, for example, featured more than 2,000 performers and a grandstand that could accommodate 4,500, and one of its eight performances alone had an audience of 8,000. Winchester was following in the footsteps of nearby Romsey, where in 1907 pageanteers numbering 1,200 – in a town of only 4,000 people – performed 10 scenes from local history set from 907 to 1648. Dozens more pageants were staged across Britain in the years before the First World War, including one at the Scottish National Exhibition of 1908, a National Pageant of Wales at Sophia Gardens in Cardiff in 1909 and a pageant of London at the Festival of Empire in 1911. In this period, the heartland of pageantry was the south of England, and the most notable pageants took place in relatively small towns with long histories: those named above, and also, for example, St Albans (Herbert Jarman, 1907), Bath (Frank Lascelles, 1909) and Huntingdon (Constance Benson, 1913).²¹ Insofar as one can describe a typical English pageant from this time, it began with an episode depicting Roman times or the early medieval period, contained plenty of medieval scenes and concluded with something set in the age of the Tudors or Stuarts. Elizabeth I, the most widespread single

¹⁶Alfred Bowker, *The King Alfred Millenary: A Record of the Proceedings of the National Commemoration* (London: Macmillan, 1902), 100–2; Barbara Yorke, *The King Alfred Millenary in Winchester 1901*, Hampshire Papers 17 (Winchester: Hampshire County Council, 1999), 14–15. It is now known that Alfred died in 899.

¹⁷Yoshino, *Pageant Fever*, *passim*; Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry*, 42–5.

¹⁸*The Sherborne Pageant: June 12th to 15th, 1905* (Sherborne: F. Bennett, 1905).

¹⁹See Louis N. Parker, *Several of My Lives* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1928), 277–303.

²⁰On Lascelles, see Deborah Sugg Ryan, 'Staging the Imperial City: The Pageant of London, 1911', in *Imperial Cities: Landscape, Display and Identity*, ed. Felix Driver and David Gilbert (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 117–35.

²¹Constance Benson was the wife of Frank Benson, pageant-master at Winchester.

character in historical pageants, often closed the performance: according to many pageant narratives, it was during her reign that the modern English nation had come into being. Thus many pageants culminated in scenes of Elizabethan merry-making, featuring maypoles and morris dancing.²²

Pageant fever went into remission in 1914, but after the end of the First World War it soon took hold again. Indeed, the craze for pageantry spread even further than it had done before the war: it appeared in large towns and cities, small parishes, schools, churches, youth organisations such as the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides, voluntary bodies including Women's Institutes, and political organisations from the Communist Party to the Conservatives. Thousands of volunteers could be involved: the monumental pageant of empire staged at Wembley in 1924, for example, had 15,000 human performers, as well as elephants, sheep, camels, monkeys, parrots and a bear. The village or country house pageant was another notable feature of the inter-war period, depicted most famously in Virginia Woolf's novel *Between the Acts*, but also in crime fiction and in Richmal Crompton's *William* stories.²³ However, the real heartland of inter-war pageantry was the large industrial town: as Tom Hulme has shown elsewhere, Manchester, Stoke-on-Trent, Liverpool, Bradford, Sheffield, Coventry, Birmingham, Nottingham, Newcastle and Leicester all staged major pageants at this time. Some of these were held in association with civic weeks: celebrations of local municipal, economic and cultural identity and strength. Pageantry thus became a medium for civic publicity and boosterism.²⁴ Pageants now sometimes included more recent history and often depicted municipal events and local industries: the Southampton silver jubilee pageant of 1935, for example, celebrated the civic history of the town as well as royal visits, bringing the action down to the nineteenth century and Queen Victoria (though the theatrical censors would not permit her to be depicted directly).²⁵ Like many others, the Southampton pageant had an explicitly educational purpose, as illustrated by the attention it paid to young people: it was organised to support the King George V Jubilee Trust, which funded youth projects, and was accompanied by an evening procession of 3,000 children.

As in 1914, the outbreak of the Second World War put a stop, by and large, to major pageanting. Yet, despite post-war austerity, important pageants were put on in the late 1940s: Southampton in 1947, St Albans in 1948 and Nottingham in 1949 are some examples, and at Arbroath, in Angus, no fewer than 10 pageants were staged between 1947 and 1956. There was also a flurry of pageants held to coincide with the Festival of Britain in 1951, and another at the time of the Coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953. Many of the Festival pageants foregrounded modern social history, under the influence of G.D.H. Cole and Raymond Postgate's popular book, *The Common People*, first published in 1938 and reissued

²²On Elizabethan endings, see Readman, 'Place of the Past', 177, 179; Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry*, 46.

²³Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (London: Hogarth Press, 1941); V.L. Whitechurch, *Murder at the Pageant* (London: W. Collins, 1930); Clifton Robbins, *The Man without a Face* (London: Ernest Benn, 1932); Richmal Crompton, 'The May King', in *More William* (London: George Newnes, 1923), chapter 8.

²⁴Tom Hulme, '"A nation of town criers": Civic Publicity and Historical Pageantry in Inter-War Britain', *Urban History* 44 (2017): 270–92.

²⁵The proscription was lifted in 1937: Tom Hulme, 'A Queen Who Can't Be Seen: Pageants and Censorship in the 1930s', 6 October 2014: <http://www.historicalpageants.ac.uk/publications/blog/queen-who-cant-be-seen-pageants-and-censorship/> (accessed 8 August 2018).

in 1946,²⁶ although in 1953 royal characters and elite-centred history made a reappearance in light of the royal event that many pageants celebrated.²⁷ Pageants remained quite popular through the 1950s, before going into steady decline by the early 1960s. Nevertheless, they remained a smaller but still significant element of local historical culture, especially in small towns, well into the 1970s and 1980s, and occasionally beyond, as the example of Arbroath illustrates: here, a further eight pageants took place between 1960 and 2005. The town of Axbridge in Somerset staged its first pageant in 1967, another in 1970, and then one every 10 years thereafter, with the next scheduled for 2020;²⁸ and there were revivals of historical pageantry at the time of Elizabeth II's silver jubilee in 1977, and again during the millennium celebrations of 2000.

Historical pageantry has involved many household names, including the historian Arthur Bryant and the novelist E.M. Forster, as well as composers such as Ralph Vaughan Williams, Edward Elgar and Benjamin Britten. Pageants have featured in fiction: not just in the examples already noted, but also in novels by Arthur Quiller-Couch (himself involved with the Winchester pageant of 1908), in work by the children's writer Noel Streatfeild and in a recent novel – *A God in Ruins* – by Kate Atkinson.²⁹ In 2016 the long-running BBC Radio 4 series *The Archers* featured a storyline about a historical pageant organised in Ambridge by the local busybody Lynda Snell. Pageants themselves spawned theatrical works: Lawrence du Garde Peach, for example, wrote a satirical play called *The Town That Would Have a Pageant*, published in 1952, set in the fictional town of Mangle-Wurzleton but based on his experiences as pageant-master at Nottingham in 1949.³⁰ Pageants were often filmed and shown locally in cinemas, and some were audio-recorded and presented on the radio, where script-writers and performers would provide insights into the characters and episodes. They also appeared in television documentaries.³¹ In short, then, historical pageantry pervaded popular culture in mid-twentieth-century Britain to an extent that it is easy to overlook given its subsequent decline.

As with *tableaux vivants* before them, pageants often had a didactic function.³² They aimed, to a varying extent, to educate, and many involved schools and other educational institutions. This was evident from the outset. At Sherborne in 1905, Sherborne School featured prominently in the drama, being presented as tracing its origins – as did the town –

²⁶G.D.H. Cole and Raymond Postgate, *The Common People 1746–1946* (London: Methuen, 1946). See Alexander Hutton, 'The "Quite Ordinary Man" at the Pageant: History and Local Identity at the 1951 Festival of Britain', in *Restaging the Past: Historical Pageants, Culture and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain*, ed. Angela Bartie, Linda Fleming, Mark Freeman, Alexander Hutton and Paul Readman (London: UCL Press, forthcoming).

²⁷An example was the 1953 St Albans pageant, 'The Masque of the Queens': see Freeman, "Splendid Display".

²⁸'Axbridge Pageant': <http://www.axbridgepageant.org.uk/> (accessed 8 August 2020).

²⁹Noel Streatfeild, *Gemma* (London: Collins, 1973); Kate Atkinson, *A God in Ruins* (London: Doubleday, 2015). Atkinson's pageant appears in a pastiche of Richmal Crompton.

³⁰Lawrence du Garde Peach, *The Town That Would Have a Pageant* (London: Samuel French, 1952); Tom Hulme, 'Lawrence du Garde Peach, the Nottingham 1949 Quincentenary, and "The Town That Would Have a Pageant"', 7 May 2014, <http://www.historicalpageants.ac.uk/publications/blog/lawrence-du-garde-peach/> (accessed 8 August 2018).

³¹The Bury St Edmunds pageant of 1959 is one example. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F5Va_Nm-ev0 (accessed 8 August 2018).

³²At the Alfred Millenary of 1901, two performances of a 'series of tableaux illustrating episodes and legends in the life of King Alfred' were put on for the benefit of the elementary school children of Winchester, and a list of Alfred-themed tableaux for use in Hampshire schools was also produced. See Bowker, *King Alfred Millenary*, 101, and Barbara Yorke, 'Alfredism: The Use and Abuse of King Alfred's Reputation in Later Centuries', in *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh-Centenary Conferences*, ed. Timothy Reuter (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 372 n. 81.

to the year 705; pupils, including the school choir, participated in the performance; and Parker himself had been a much-appreciated music master at the school between 1877 and 1892.³³ Three years later, at Winchester, the connection between town and school figured less prominently in the action, the event being billed as a 'national' pageant, but audiences would have been left in no doubt as to the importance of William of Wykeham, and the college he founded, to the history of the place. Of the seven script-writers, five had connections to Winchester College.³⁴ Elsewhere, many schools saw fit to mark their own institutional anniversaries with historical pageants, early examples including Kingston Grammar School in 1909 and Charterhouse in 1911.³⁵

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the close involvement of churches in education, the didactic content of many pageants, particularly in the early years of the twentieth century, was closely related to religious instruction. Many denominations – Nonconformist and (to a lesser extent) Catholic as well as Anglican – saw pageants as a potent means of bringing the past into the service of Christianity.³⁶ In parishes up and down the country, pageants were embraced as a way of keeping alive the memory of church founders and missionaries, and – more generally, in the context of pessimism about the declining role of Christianity in national life – of demonstrating the antiquity of Christian worship in England. This last aim was especially important to Anglican clerics, who were closely involved in the organisation of many pageants, and indeed were responsible for one of the largest of all: the English Church Pageant of 1909. This event was primarily educational in intent, aiming to be 'a vehicle of enormous power in educating through the eye and mind the people of the Country in the history of their Church'. In the words of one of its lead organisers, Percy Dearmer, vicar of St Mary-the-Virgin in Primrose Hill, '[p]ageants ... can stir the imagination. They can popularize the historic sense. They can point the way to future knowledge, and create the desire for it ... They can give proportion, balance, breadth. In a word they can educate'.³⁷

As evident in its religious inflection, the educational agenda of historical pageantry was closely associated with a concern to provide instruction about the distant past, and the medieval past in particular.³⁸ This concern was a growing one, manifesting itself in – among other things – the Alfred Millenary of 1901, which saw the erection and ceremonial unveiling of a large statue of the great king in Winchester, as well as other commemorative activities such as public lectures, a procession through the city and an exhibition of Alfrediana at the British Museum.³⁹ Involving learned societies,

³³ Angela Bartie, Linda Fleming, Mark Freeman, Tom Hulme, Alex Hutton and Paul Readman, 'The Sherborne Pageant', *The Redress of the Past*, <http://www.historicalpageants.ac.uk/pageants/1193/> (accessed 8 August 2018).

³⁴ *Winchester National Pageant: The Book of the Words and Music* (Winchester: Warren and Son, 1908), esp. 47–52; Yoshino, *Pageant Fever*, 226.

³⁵ Angela Bartie, Linda Fleming, Mark Freeman, Tom Hulme, Alex Hutton and Paul Readman, 'Kingston Grammar School Sexcentenary Pageant', *The Redress of the Past*, <http://www.historicalpageants.ac.uk/pageants/1571/> (accessed 8 August 2018); *Daily Graphic*, 10 July 1911, 5.

³⁶ More than 80 entries in the *Redress of the Past* database are categorised as 'church pageants', that is 'pageants staged by, or mainly relating to the history of, a church or group of churches'. On the popularity of pageantry with Nonconformists, and especially Nonconformist women, see Amy Binns, 'New Heroines for New Causes: How Provincial Women Promoted a Revisionist History through Post-Suffrage Pageants', *Women's History Review* 27 (2017): 221–46.

³⁷ Arthur Burns, 'A National Church Tells its Story: The English Church Pageant of 1909', in Bartie et al., *Restaging the Past*.

³⁸ See Angela Bartie, Linda Fleming, Mark Freeman, Tom Hulme, Alexander Hutton and Paul Readman, 'Historical Pageants and the Medieval Past in Twentieth-Century England', *English Historical Review* 133 (2018): 866–902.

³⁹ Yorke, *Alfred Millenary*. For the wider regional and national context of the Millenary, see Readman, 'Place of the Past', and Paul Readman, 'Commemorating the Past in Edwardian Hampshire: King Alfred, Pageantry and Empire', in *Southampton: Gateway to the British Empire*, ed. Miles Taylor (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 95–113.

universities, schools and prominent clerics and intellectuals, the millenary – statue, procession, *tableaux vivants* and all – was conceived as having a great educative function, a means by which ‘the people’, in the words of the politician, historian and educationalist James Bryce, might be provided with ‘a visible memorial ... which should touch their imaginations and bid them remember and rejoice in the splendid figures who had made England what she was’.⁴⁰ This purpose was underlined on the day of the unveiling itself, which featured a special event at the statue for 2,000 Winchester schoolchildren presided over by the Lord Mayor and the Earl of Rosebery.⁴¹

The educational agenda evident in the Alfred millenary – and in the historical pageants that followed hot on its heels – persisted into the post-war years, and indeed was amplified further. Pageants grew in scale, becoming still more popular with schools, and increasing numbers of schoolchildren were involved as performers. Perhaps the most striking indication of this was the Preston historical pageant of 1922, which saw the participation of no fewer than 11,000 local children and was organised on a voluntary basis by local schoolteachers. [Figure 1](#) shows pupils of the Deepdale Council School re-enacting ‘the onslaught of the Danes’, in which the raiding Vikings burn down a church and rob a priest of the tithes his



Figure 1. Children performing in the Preston historical pageant, 1922. Source: A.J. Berry, *Preston Gild 1922: Historical Pageant* (Preston: George Toulmin and Sons, [édition-de-luxe] 1923), 45.

⁴⁰Bowker, *King Alfred Millenary*, 14.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 127–8. In the wake of the festivities at Winchester, schools around Britain were encouraged to devote more attention to the study of Alfred’s reign, by means of a short pamphlet produced for this purpose by the Hartley Institution, precursor to the modern-day University of Southampton: see Joanne Parker, ‘England’s Darling’: *The Victorian Cult of Alfred the Great* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 16.

god-fearing flock have just paid, before killing him.⁴² The pageant was written and produced by the town's director of education, A.J. Berry, who passionately believed that children and adults who had lived through the upheaval of the Great War could learn valuable lessons from the past, and could be inspired by the stalwartness, religiosity and ingenuity of local forebears – such as the brave Prestonians who had stood up to the heathen Danes.⁴³

If the Preston pageant and those like it told the story of the town, other school pageants offered instruction in English history more generally, though still with some local detail: such was the aim of the Widnes Schools' Coronation Pageant of 1953, featuring 2,200 performers, for instance. Individual schools, too, told their own histories through pageants: examples – which could be greatly multiplied – include the Parsons Mead School Golden Jubilee Pageant of 1947 and two pageants at Hull Grammar School in 1936 and 1979. Others offered a mixture of school and local history, such as the pageant at Kimbolton, Huntingdonshire, in 1957, while many schools were drawn into the organisation of larger civic pageants. Teachers were often responsible for scripts and music, and children could be coerced into pageanting when adults were reluctant or unable to put themselves forward. Adult education organisations also staged pageants: the 'Pageant of College Green' in Bristol in 1930 was organised by the Bristol Folk House, one of a number of educational centres that participated enthusiastically in the amateur dramatics boom of the inter-war years.⁴⁴ Branches of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) were involved in some inter-war pageants, ranging from the small village performance at Chittlehampton in Devon in 1936 – where the Association collaborated with the University College of the South-West Rural Extension Scheme and local religious organisations⁴⁵ – to the Bradford pageant of 1931, in which the WEA staged the episode depicting the industrial revolution.

The dramatic vividness of pageants could contrast starkly with the way that history was taught in the classroom. This was noted in commentary on 'A Pageant of Bishopsgate Ward', which was staged in 1926 by the Central Foundation Girls' School, in the City of London, as part of the school's bicentenary celebrations. Writing in the souvenir programme, the critic and historian Frederick E. Hansford explained what he saw as the educational value of the pageant:

until very recent years, history was one of the worst taught subjects in the curriculum of our schools, very largely because events long past were depicted as a series of dull facts accompanied by meaningless dates. History taught in the pageant way becomes alive and vivid, for both the actors and the audience see the historical personages as alive and human, and feel that their joys and hopes, griefs and fears, their ambitions and temptations, exaltations and abasements are not, after all, dissimilar from our own.⁴⁶

⁴² A.J. Berry, *Preston Gild 1922: Historical Pageant* (Preston: George Toulmin and Sons, [editon-de-luxe] 1923), 44–5 [plate on 45].

⁴³ See A.J. Berry, *Preston Gild 1922: Programme of the Pageant in Avenham Park* (Preston: G. Toulmin and Sons, 1922), 7. On the Preston pageant more generally, see Keith Vernon, 'School History and Civic Education: The Preston Guild Historical Pageant of 1922', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire* 162 (2013): 159–84.

⁴⁴ See Allardyce Nicoll, *English Drama 1900–30: The Beginnings of the Modern Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 87–93; *The Drama in Adult Education: A Report of the Adult Education Committee of the Board of Education* (London: HMSO, 1926), 77–84.

⁴⁵ Angela Bartie, Linda Fleming, Mark Freeman, Tom Hulme, Alex Hutton and Paul Readman, 'Chittlehampton Pilgrimage and Pageant', *The Redress of the Past*, <http://www.historicalpageants.ac.uk/pageants/1270/> (accessed 8 August 2018).

⁴⁶ *Central Foundation Girls' School: Bicentenary Magazine 1726–1926*, 54, <http://fluencycontent2-schoolwebsite.netdna-ssl.com/FileCluster/CentralFoundationGirls/MainFolder/About%20Us/docs/bicentenary%20magazine%201726%20-%201926.pdf> (accessed 8 August 2018).

Large civic pageants were also conscious of their duty to educate the population in a lively and accessible fashion, and therefore dress rehearsals were often opened to special sections of the public, particularly pupils of local schools. Indeed, for many people – young and old – seeing a pageant was the first time that history seemed interesting and easily understandable: David Cannadine, Jenny Keating and Nicola Sheldon have contrasted the use of drama in some schools’ teaching of history with the ‘lifeless rote learning’ inflicted on pupils elsewhere.⁴⁷ Adult educators also tried to use drama to inspire students: at Taunton in 1927, for example, the WEA put on a local history course, ‘The Story of Somerset’, in the build-up to the pageant of the following year; and at Stoke-on-Trent in 1930 John Thomas, resident tutor for North Staffordshire and script-writer for a large proportion of the pageant, expressed the hope that the ‘stimulus given by the dramatic presentation of the episodes’ would encourage more people to come to his WEA classes.⁴⁸

The potential of theatrical performance as a force for the promotion of historical understanding should not, perhaps, be surprising. Drama, as Martha Vandrei and others have emphasised,⁴⁹ has long been a powerful vector of historical understanding, and pageants – like films – were powerfully expressive of this. Indeed, it could be argued that, psychologically, meaningful engagement with the past – whether in the classroom, in the library or on the pageant arena – necessarily involves an element of dramatisation. The philosopher of history R.G. Collingwood suggested that anyone unable to appreciate the dramatic force of history ‘will never be an historian’.⁵⁰ For Collingwood, history was ‘the re-enactment of past experience’, even – as he put it – ‘drama’, the historian having to ‘re-enact the past in his [*sic*] own mind’.⁵¹ Whether as a spectator or a cast-member, then, the experience of a pageant was cognitively consonant with the business of history, of learning about and understanding the past.

Pageants and the past: history, fiction and authenticity

Strictly speaking, pageants, of course, were not historical re-enactments: they were explicitly and unashamedly theatricalised representations of particular historical moments. Even where the events depicted had actually happened, the dialogue was invariably and of necessity invented, though with much borrowing: it was not unusual, for example, to base an episode wholly or mainly on an excerpt from one of Shakespeare’s history plays. Many pageants contained factual errors, both accidental and deliberate. Dates were moved and events creatively re-imagined. Many sins of omission were committed by pageant organisers, who preferred to focus on the distant past rather than more recent history, which seemed to offer scope for the depiction of fracturing divisions rather than social and political harmony. How to deal with the civil war, or the social effects of industrialisation, or the rise of party politics and organised

⁴⁷David Cannadine, Jenny Keating and Nicola Sheldon, *The Right Kind of History: Teaching the Past in Twentieth-Century England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 88.

⁴⁸‘W.E.A. and the Taunton Pageant’, *Taunton Courier and Western Advertiser*, 28 September 1927, 6; ‘Historical Pageant’, *Evening Sentinel* [Stoke], 9 May 1930, 4.

⁴⁹Martha Vandrei, *Queen Boudica and Historical Culture in Britain: An Image of Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Dominique Goy-Blanquet, *Shakespeare’s Early History Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁵⁰William H. Day, *History as Re-enactment: R. G. Collingwood’s Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 226.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 94, 173; R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994 [1st ed. 1946]), 282ff.

labour? Pageants staged from the 1920s and 1930s onwards, often in industrial towns and cities, were more likely to include later periods, but even here the accent was generally on consensus rather than disharmony. Such an emphasis could provoke controversy. At Manchester in 1938, for example, the organisers initially had not intended to portray the Peterloo massacre of 1819, but this omission angered local trade unions as well as the Manchester and Salford District of the Communist Party. After a sustained campaign, Peterloo was eventually included in a processional tableau alongside the opening of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway and other industrial events of the early nineteenth century. This was too little, too late for the communists, however, who staged an alternative pageant entitled *100 Years of Struggle: Manchester's Centenary, the Real Story*, in opposition to the main event.⁵² There had been a similar reaction seven years earlier at Bradford, where the content of the industrial revolution episode, performed by the WEA, occasioned controversy. Here, last-minute changes were made to the section that featured the Luddites: the pageant's 'historical subcommittee' ensured that the main message of the episode was the positive benefits brought by industrialisation.⁵³ This in turn prompted the Bradford Charter Committee, an organisation run by the Communist Party, to publish a pamphlet excoriating the pageant and offering an alternative version of recent local economic history.⁵⁴

Criticism also came from academic historians, usually on somewhat different grounds. In 1910, the medieval historian J.H. Round condemned what he called the 'travesties of history' perpetuated in pageants, singling out for particular censure Parker's 1908 Dover pageant.⁵⁵ Here, Archbishop Stigand was shown rallying the townspeople to resist William the Conqueror in 1066, thereby winning William's admiration, the preservation of their liberties and the town's motto 'Invicta' (unconquered).⁵⁶ This episode was presented as factual, in contrast to the avowedly 'mythical' preceding scene featuring King Arthur, and Round was scathing about the inclusion of the Norman 'fable'.⁵⁷ The distant past was particularly susceptible to re-imaginings and re-inventions, and it was not unusual to see Arthur or Robin Hood rubbing shoulders with characters for whom there is much more documentary evidence. Welsh pageants were especially keen to claim Arthur as a native hero and an example of the nation's valour and patriotism, while in Scotland the myth-history of Walter Scott was a staple of pageant narratives – indeed, some pageants were completely based on Scott's work.⁵⁸ Across Britain, prehistoric scenes featured fanciful accounts of attempted human sacrifices and druidical rites, and even dragons sometimes appeared: a Welsh one at Swansea in 1935, one slain by Bishop Jocelin at Wells in

⁵² *Manchester Guardian*, 8 January 1938, 14; 13 April 1938, 11; *Manchester Historical Pageant* (Manchester: Historical Pageant Committee, 1938); *100 Years of Struggle: Manchester's Centenary, the Real Story* (Manchester: Manchester and Salford District Communist Party, 1938). Peterloo had also been overlooked in the 1926 Manchester pageant, but it was depicted in great detail at the Lancashire Cotton Pageant of 1932.

⁵³ Historical subcommittee notes, 6 and 10 March 1931, West Yorkshire Archives Service, Bradford, 39/D81/10; Hilda M. Snowden, 'Founders of the Workers' Educational Association in Bradford', *Bradford Antiquary* 3 (1987): 21–6.

⁵⁴ *Workers and Wool* (Rawtenstall: Bradford Charter Committee, 1931); Modern Records Centre, Warwick, MSS.5x/2/44/1.

⁵⁵ J. Horace Round, *Peerage and Pedigree: Studies in Peerage Law and Family History*, 2 vols (London: James Nisbet and Co., 1910), I, 305.

⁵⁶ Louis N. Parker, *The Dover Pageant* (Dover: Grigg and Son, 1908), 10–17.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 6–9; Round, *Peerage and Pedigree*, I, 304–5.

⁵⁸ Welsh examples featuring Arthur include the National Pageant of Wales (1909), the Gower Pageant (1924) and the Cardiff Castle Pageant (1931). There were Walter Scott centenary pageants at Edinburgh, Perth and elsewhere in 1932.

1923, and another dispatched by St George in a play-within-the-pageant at St Albans in 1953.⁵⁹ (This last pageant was probably the inspiration for the plot of Rosemary Manning's children's novel *Dragon in Danger* (1959), in which the hero 'R. Dragon' appears in a pageant at 'St Aubyns'.⁶⁰) More fictional fun was had at Birmingham in 1938, where a fire-breathing dinosaur called Egbert battled with fur-clad cavemen in a scene entitled 'The Dawn of History'. Pageants blended history with literature, textbook account with myth and legend, and fact with fiction – all to good dramatic effect. There is, then, a case for seeing them, with Round and other critics, as inauthentic forms of popular engagement with the past: at least as much entertainment as education.

There is, however, an alternative perspective. It is true that pure invention and fantasy were evident in pageants, and increasingly so as time passed, but it is also important to note that pageants could be more faithful to the historical record than their critics alleged. Many historians were involved in producing pageants, ranging from major academic figures to indefatigable local antiquarians. Among the latter, one example is Charles H. Ashdown, script-writer at St Albans in 1907 and Hertford in 1914. A schoolmaster, local preservationist and author of a substantial history of St Albans published in 1893, as well as later works on military history, Ashdown also took the role of pageant-master at Hertford. His wife Emily, herself a world-renowned historian of costume, was 'Chief Mistress of the Robes' at both St Albans and Hertford.⁶¹ Like many of its counterparts elsewhere, the souvenir programme at St Albans was larded with references to primary sources on which scenes were based, as well as 'historical notes' (written by Ashdown and others) on various aspects of the town and its past.⁶² Ashdown himself was quite clear as to the importance of accuracy in pageants: 'Truthfulness in pageantry is one of its chief charms, differentiating it from the stage, for all representations of historical episodes should be reproduced as truly and as accurately as circumstances permit, and with that due solemnity and earnestness which all innately feel when dealing with ancestral themes'.⁶³ This did not mean that dramatic licence was forbidden, but Ashdown's pompous insistence on 'truthfulness' captures the spirit of the Edwardian pioneers of the new pageant movement. Some better-known academic historians shared Ashdown's enthusiasm for pageantry: one early example was Charles Oman, Chichele professor of modern history at Oxford and a strong supporter of pageants both in Oxford and beyond.⁶⁴ For Oman, writing in the 'handbook' of the Harrow Historical Pageant in 1923, pageants were 'an excellent means of teaching local patriotism and the sense of civic fellowship, by a display of local history'.⁶⁵ The prolific Cambridge historian

⁵⁹On the St Albans dragon, see Freeman, "Splendid Display", 447.

⁶⁰Rosemary Manning, *Dragon in Danger* (London: Constable, 1959).

⁶¹Charles H. Ashdown, *St Albans Historical and Picturesque* (London: Elliot Stock, 1893); Charles H. Ashdown, *British and Foreign Arms & Armour* (London: T.C. and E.C. Jack, 1909); Mrs Charles H. Ashdown, *British Costume during 19 Centuries, Civil and Ecclesiastical* (London: T.C. and E.C. Jack, 1910); Philip Sheail, *Hertford's Grand Pageant 1914* (Hertford: Moleworth Hawthorn, 2014), 5–6 and *passim*; Freeman, "Splendid Display", 429.

⁶²*St Albans and its Pageant: Souvenir 1907* (St Albans: Smith's Printing Agency, 1907).

⁶³Quoted in Sheail, *Hertford's Grand Pageant*, 14.

⁶⁴See Paddy Griffith, 'Oman, Sir Charles William Patrick (1860–1946)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁶⁵Sir Charles Oman, 'In Praise of Pageantry', in *The Handbook of the Harrow Historical Pageant* (Harrow: Pageant Office, 1923), 8.

G.M. Trevelyan was also an enthusiast: he wrote five scenes and an epilogue for the Berkhamsted pageant of 1922, and even acted in it himself, taking the part of Geoffrey Chaucer.⁶⁶ Yet another example was Agnes Mure Mackenzie, a well-known Scottish historian and author of textbooks that were used for decades in schools across Scotland: she was heavily involved, until her death in 1955, with the series of pageants in Arbroath that began in 1947.⁶⁷ Here as elsewhere, the souvenir publications contained references to scholarly and antiquarian works – and, from 1949, the text of Mackenzie’s own translation of the ‘Declaration of Arbroath’, on which the performance was centred.⁶⁸ For Mackenzie, the educational value of pageants was abundantly clear, and some of the academic historical establishment seemed to agree. Indeed, in 1907 Louis Napoleon Parker himself was elected a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society.⁶⁹

It is certainly the case that, four or five decades after Parker had first infected Britain with pageant fever, many pageant-masters emphasised the demands of entertainment more than education: by the 1940s and 1950s, pageants were influenced by cinema, radio and, increasingly, television, and this frequently involved simplified dialogue on the one hand, and elaborate lighting and sound effects on the other. At Nottingham in 1949, pageant-master Lawrence du Garde Peach told the local newspaper that a pageant should be ‘simply entertainment. It must compete with the cinema across the way, and the dance hall ... I would sacrifice any historical fact in order to get entertainment value in my script’.⁷⁰ Peach’s pageant was full of humour, myth and legend – Robin Hood was an important character, of course – and other pageants followed his precepts.⁷¹ At St Albans in 1968, the radio and television writer Arthur Swinson wrote the script of the pageant, declaring that his ‘first concern [was] to construct a viable theatrical vehicle’, ahead of any matters of historical accuracy or interpretation.⁷² Such claims did not go unchallenged. At Nottingham, for example, Peach’s somewhat cavalier attitude was criticised by correspondents in the local press: one asked whether it would ‘be impertinent to ask if the pageant script was passed by any local body of experts such as the appropriate faculty at the University or the Thoroton Society’.⁷³ As at Manchester and Bradford in the 1930s, Nottingham’s branch of the Communist Party attacked the ‘distortion’ of history in the pageant.⁷⁴ Yet, despite these criticisms, there was a serious purpose even behind Peach’s efforts. At Nottingham his pageant featured a song, ‘We Inherit from Our Fathers’, which exhorted: ‘In pictures of the storied past, learn us of

⁶⁶Mary Moorman, *George Macaulay Trevelyan: A Memoir* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1980), 202. Trevelyan took up the Regius chair of history at Cambridge in 1927.

⁶⁷William Donaldson, ‘Mackenzie, Agnes Mure (1891–1955)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*; see, for example, Agnes Mure Mackenzie, *A History of Britain and Europe for Scottish Schools* (Glasgow: Grant Educational Co., 1949).

⁶⁸Arbroath Abbey Pageant Society, *Pageant of the Declaration of Independence Souvenir Programme* (Arbroath: Arbroath Abbey Pageant Society, 1949).

⁶⁹Royal Historical Society list of fellows, University College London.

⁷⁰‘Pageant Worthy of City’, *Nottingham Evening Post*, 28 March 1949, 1. See Bartie et al., ‘Historical Pageants and the Medieval Past’.

⁷¹Souvenir programme, 1949: Nottinghamshire Archives (NA), DD/1803/17.

⁷²Arthur Swinson, ‘Time and the City: A Pageant Play’ (unpublished typescript, 1968), appendix: St Albans Central Library, LOC.822/SWI/STA.

⁷³‘Pageant of the Past’, Letter from E. Flewitt to Editor’s Letter Bag, *Nottingham Evening Post*, 8 July 1949, 4; *Nottingham Evening Post*, 31 March 1949, 3. The Thoroton Society of Nottingham is a historical and archaeological society that has, since 1897, published a series of *Transactions*.

⁷⁴‘Nottm. Pageant Critics’, *Nottingham Evening Post*, 7 May 1949, 1.

the greater pride, honour those of this our city who for freedom died. Honour those who live undaunted, those for whom the common good . . . freedom's foes withstood'.⁷⁵ This was one of many pageant songs and hymns specially written in the post-war period to stir communities into action.⁷⁶ Swinson, too, was aware of the responsibilities that went with the production of historical drama, avowing that 'I have tried to give a reasonable (if highly personal) interpretation of certain events which have taken place in St Albans and so form part of the history of our community'.⁷⁷ His small pageant was performed by children from eight local schools and a youth theatre group: the educational aims of pageantry were by no means forgotten.

Pageants, then, demonstrate the mutual interplay between education and entertainment, and between the apparent opposites of history and fiction. This interplay is amply recognised in the literature on heritage: Johnson, for example, is careful 'not to advance the truth claims of history over those of fiction, nor indeed the narrative claims of fiction over those of history, nor even to suggest that one is more stable or trustworthy than the other'.⁷⁸ We go further than this and suggest that, in pageants, fictional and mythical pasts were often necessary elements of performed heritage: it would be difficult to imagine a Nottingham pageant without Robin Hood, or a pageant near Glastonbury that did not feature King Arthur.⁷⁹ Other characters from local legend also appeared, such as Guy of Warwick, a tenth-century figure with 'little or no basis in history', who appeared in both the Warwick pageant of 1906 and the 'Spirit of Warwickshire' pageant in 1930.⁸⁰ Indeed, in 1927 there was a pageant devoted solely to the life of Guy, performed at Guy's Cliffe, where he had supposedly retired as a hermit.⁸¹ At Warwick and elsewhere, traditions were in evidence alongside and within the historical episodes performed. Thus the story of the 'bear and ragged staff', which gave the Warwick coat of arms its emblem, was of course a legend, but its symbolic importance to the identity of the town was such that its inclusion in the 1906 pageant was wholly in line with local custom and heritage: the legend, after all, was itself a part of Warwick's past.⁸² It was a similar story with the tradition surrounding Dover's motto of 'Invicta', a detail of the Dover pageant that may have been mocked by J.H. Round, but was nevertheless central to local tradition and identity. Inclusions such as these demonstrate the importance of shared folk traditions to those who staged, performed in and watched pageants, and are echoed elsewhere, notably in Ireland, where, as Joan FitzPatrick Dean has shown, the historical and legendary roots of national identity were repeatedly blended in pageants across the twentieth century.⁸³ The stories told in pageants

⁷⁵Sheet music, 'We Inherit from Our Fathers', words by Lawrence du Garde Peach and music by William Summers, NA, DD/2464/2/1Q.

⁷⁶Freeman, "Splendid Display", 442.

⁷⁷Swinson, 'Time and the City', appendix.

⁷⁸Johnson, 'Space of "Museum Theatre"', 56.

⁷⁹There was a 'pageant of peace' in Nottingham in 1919 that showed scenes from the First World War, and a small church pageant in 1924, neither of which featured Robin Hood. However, the major civic pageants in Nottingham, and many others elsewhere, did feature the mythical hero. Arthur appeared in the 'Butleigh Revel', a pageant in 1906 directly inspired by the one at Sherborne the preceding year, and in the nearby Taunton pageant of 1928. There was a pageant entirely devoted to Arthurian legend at Tintagel in 1929.

⁸⁰Douglas Gray, 'Guy of Warwick (supp. fl. c. 930)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

⁸¹Pageant programme, Hampshire Record Office (HRO), 9A06/C1; *Royal Leamington Spa Courier and Warwickshire Standard*, 22 July 1927, 8.

⁸²L.N. Parker, *The Warwick Pageant* (Warwick: Evans and Co., 1906). The 'bear and ragged staff' story was the subject of episode II.

⁸³Dean, *All Dressed Up*.

rang true because they were based on strong, pre-existing and popularly understood traditions and versions of the past, and on understandings of local and national identity that were rooted in time and place.

The sense of place was particularly important: pageants derived authenticity from their setting. Most were staged outdoors, many on sites rich in local history that were central to landscapes of community memory. The Winchester pageant was held at Wolvesey Castle; the Arbroath pageants took place at the abbey; the Mayflower pageant, at Southampton in 1920, was performed on the quayside; examples could be greatly multiplied. Some of the early pageant-masters, notably Parker,⁸⁴ considered this a particularly important aspect of pageant-making, and others commented on it, too. The *Western Daily Press*, reporting on Bristol's 'Pageant of College Green' in 1930, averred that '[t]he fact of playing an historical pageant amid the mellowed ruins of the Bishop's Palace ... added greatly to the effectiveness of the scenes', and noted further that '[t]wo at least of the incidents represented might very well have taken place on the spot'.⁸⁵ A common device was to have the pageant narrated by a character representing the 'spirit' of the place where it was staged, or simply a personification of the place, creating a dramatic link between place and past events.⁸⁶ This link remains important today: community plays and contemporary site-specific theatre often echo the importance of place in historical drama.⁸⁷ Moreover, performance itself can add new layers of meaning and memory to the locational context, as is recognised in contemporary heritage studies. Laurajane Smith, for example, argues that 'heritage' itself is a performance, not simply a place: 'not the historic monument, archaeological site, or museum artefact, but rather the activities that occur at and around these places and objects'.⁸⁸ We show below how pageants themselves created new memories and, in some cases, new monuments in the communities that performed them. It was also clear to many that pageants stimulated an interest in local history that had previously been absent or dormant: writing in 1962 and recalling the St Albans pageant of 1953, the city's former mayor Elsie Toms noted that '[s]ince that time all sorts of voluntary societies want lectures on the history of old St Albans, and anybody who knows about it is in constant demand'.⁸⁹ Pageants persuaded many people to look afresh at the ancient and medieval past that was inscribed in their surroundings.

Pageants and community

Pageants were celebrations of community togetherness: Parker and many pageant-masters who followed him insisted that all social classes should be involved. Parker declared that a pageant should be 'a great Festival of Brotherhood, in which all

⁸⁴Parker, *Several of My Lives*, 279–80.

⁸⁵*Western Daily Press*, 26 June 1930, 9; 24 June 1930, 6.

⁸⁶Examples include Scarborough (1912) and King's Lynn (1954).

⁸⁷In 2013, for example, the Globe Theatre performed the series of Shakespeare's *Henry VI* plays at various outdoor locations associated with the Wars of the Roses. See also Mike Pearson, *Site-Specific Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁸⁸Laurajane Smith, 'The "Doing" of Heritage: Heritage as Performance', in Jackson and Kidd, *Performing Heritage*, 71.

⁸⁹Elsie Toms, *The Story of St Albans* (St Albans: Gainsborough Press, 1962), 191.

affection'. And as can be seen from the list of performers given on the page of the address concerning this episode, a number were illiterate, signing with a mark (see Figure 2).⁹⁴ Many pageants, then, were designed, in both content and organisation, to stimulate a spirit of social harmony under benevolent middle-class leadership: this, indeed, can be seen as an important element of their intended educative function, and one consonant with some of the objectives of classroom education – at least in the early part of the twentieth century.⁹⁵

In this sense, pageants could be socially and historically conservative, presenting a version of the past that shored up local inequalities and perpetuated the smugness of civic elites. Michael Woods has argued that events such as the Taunton pageant of 1928 played a role in maintaining and legitimating 'hegemonic power structures' at a time of class conflict; pageants could fall into Baz Kershaw's categories of 'spectacles of domination' or 'rituals of the powerful'.⁹⁶ Others have suggested that the focus on the distant past reflected a 'protest against modernity', with the common Elizabethan ending marking a reluctance to engage with a more recent history of social conflict and industrialism.⁹⁷ However, this interpretation should not be pushed too far, for a number of reasons. First, as we have seen, a conservative account of the past in pageants could and did provoke political dissent, and the pageant form was itself adapted for counter-hegemonic purposes.⁹⁸ Second, the community itself did not always function harmoniously when a pageant was staged: sectarian tensions and industrial strife could disrupt the smoothness of preparations.⁹⁹ Third, pageants' approaches to the past changed over time: a forward-looking agenda, never entirely absent, was increasingly in evidence by the inter-war period. Far from exemplifying a retreat into an imagined green and pleasant land, or illustrating the revulsion of 'English culture' against the 'industrial spirit', many pageants positively celebrated industry, and in some cases were accompanied by industrial exhibitions: examples include Carlisle in 1928 and 1951, Salford in 1930 and Dundee in 1945.¹⁰⁰ In this sense pageants were expressions of what might be termed an adaptive modernity: they were designed to help communities to cope with the economic and social changes of the twentieth century, informed by a rich sense of history and culture. As a number of scholars have recently emphasised, this adaptive and purposive (though by no means ahistorically instrumental) 'use' of the past was in evidence elsewhere in mid-twentieth-century British culture, notably at the Festival of Britain.¹⁰¹

⁹⁴Illuminated address presented to Louis Napoleon Parker, 24 October 1905, Sherborne School Archives, SS/PAG/11/5; see also photographs of residents by J. Benjamin Stone, SS/PAG/81.

⁹⁵See, for example, Valerie E. Chancellor, *History for Their Masters: Opinion in the English History Textbook 1800–1914* (New York: August M. Kelly, 1970), 28–37.

⁹⁶Michael Woods, 'Performing Power: Local Politics and the Taunton Pageant of 1928', *Journal of Historical Geography* 25 (1999): 57–74; Baz Kershaw, *Theatre Ecology: Environments and Performance Events* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 214–15, 222–7.

⁹⁷Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry*, 149–50.

⁹⁸See discussion of the Manchester and Bradford pageant controversies above, and also, for example, Mick Wallis, 'The Popular Front Pageant: Its Emergence and Decline', *New Theatre Quarterly* 11 (1996): 17–32.

⁹⁹Matthew Vickers, 'Civic Image and Civic Patriotism in Liverpool, 1880–1914' (DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2000), 48–9, 69–73; Freeman, "'Splendid Display'", 431.

¹⁰⁰Hulme, "'A nation of town criers'"; cf. Martin J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

¹⁰¹See, for example, Harriet Atkinson, *The Festival of Britain: A Land and Its People* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 66, 141–9; Becky Conekin, *The Autobiography of a Nation: The 1951 Festival of Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 100–3. For nineteenth- and early twentieth-century antecedents to this kind of engagement with the past, see Paul Readman, *Storied Ground: Landscape and the Shaping of English National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

Finally, the scope that pageants offered for mass participation militates against a solely conservative interpretation of their impact on communities and individuals. People in their thousands freely chose to take part; pageants were events in themselves, participation in which had its own educational and social benefits. In this sense, Parker's aims were quite successfully met. His comments about 'Brotherhood' might be jarring to modern sensibilities (not least on account of their male-centredness), but they are echoed in the more recent literature on community performance. Indeed, in some respects the community play is a successor to the historical pageant – albeit on a more modest scale. One recent definition of a community play asserts that

the whole purpose ... is to draw together the local community and to involve as many people as possible in all its varying aspects ... a good community play is one which not only earns accolades for the quality of its performance but succeeds also in uniting the community in a common artistic enterprise.¹⁰²

In a similar vein, the community play pioneer Ann Jellicoe argued that 'the fundamental event is not the play itself, but the opportunity the play provides for the continuing evolution of [the] community'.¹⁰³ This view has been endorsed by others, and would surely have found favour with Parker.¹⁰⁴ Jellicoe was herself criticised for helping to maintain local social inequalities through her plays, but both she and others have argued that they empower communities in the act of their creation, because the communities themselves are the sites of local historical knowledge.¹⁰⁵ The organisation of pageants – and, indeed, the sheer scale of many of them – did not allow for the same levels of popular input into the creative process, but participation served a similar purpose, giving personal and collective satisfaction, as the next section will show. Pageanting was a learning activity in that it offered a potentially transformative experience of historical dramatisation and community engagement.

Remembering and commemorating pageants

Pageants were usually one-off events: they may have been staged several times over the course of their run, but it was rare for them to become annual, or even regular, events. However, their legacies were significant, both for communities and individuals. In many places, pageants entered the realm of memory in a significant way: intended as commemorative events, they were themselves commemorated. At Sherborne, pageant gardens were laid out with the proceeds of the event itself, and they remain available to residents and visitors as a public park.¹⁰⁶ There is a public memorial to the 1909 Bath pageant (in Sydney Gardens, not at the site of the pageant itself),¹⁰⁷ while the profit

¹⁰²Quoted in Sarah Burton, *How To Put on a Community Play* (Twickenham: Aurora Metro Press, 2011), 13.

¹⁰³Ann Jellicoe, *Community Plays: How To Put Them on* (London: Methuen, 1987), xvii.

¹⁰⁴Burton, *How To Put on a Community Play*, 15–16; Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (London: Routledge, 1992), 202–5.

¹⁰⁵Kershaw, *Politics of Performance*, 190–5.

¹⁰⁶See Angela Bartie, Linda Fleming, Mark Freeman, Tom Hulme and Paul Readman, 'Commemoration through Dramatic Performance: Historical Pageants and the Age of Anniversaries 1905–1920', in *The Age of Anniversaries: The Cult of Commemoration 1895–1925*, ed. T.G. Otte (London: Routledge, 2018), 211–12.

¹⁰⁷A replica of the Temple of Minerva, which had formed part of Bath's contribution to the 1911 London Festival of Empire, was re-erected in 1914 to commemorate the pageant of five years earlier: *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 20 June 1914, 5.



Figure 3. Memorial to the Bury St Edmunds pageant of 1959, in the abbey gardens. Photo: Mark Freeman.

generated by the 1959 Bury St Edmunds pageant paid for an ornamental water garden and a public shelter, which was installed in the abbey gardens (see [Figure 3](#)).¹⁰⁸ There are streets named after pageants in Sherborne, Bridport, Framlingham and St Albans; and Arbroath has a pub called ‘The Pageant’. Often – as at Sherborne – the profits were used for a local charitable purpose, or to help restore or safeguard an historic building; thus pageants helped to give new meanings to place. Smith has argued that ‘places receive heritage values as they are taken up in national or sub-national performances of identity and memory-making’,¹⁰⁹ and pageants were among the most spectacular of such ‘performances’ – quite literally. Many historical properties display ephemera from pageants held on-site in the past: examples include Framlingham Castle and Battle Abbey. Pageants, which did much to provoke interest in local history, have also themselves prompted much local historical research, sometimes – though often not – connected to the *Redress of the Past* project.¹¹⁰ In 2014, local historian Philip Sheail published a book to mark the centenary of the Hertford pageant, and this was launched at an event at which the mayor of Hertford spoke, and at which a local choir, the Mimram Singers, performed music from the pageant itself.¹¹¹ Events held in

¹⁰⁸The question of how best to use the funds raised by the pageant provoked intense local debate: playing fields, improvements to the public baths, the Cathedral Extension Fund and even the new sewer all had their advocates, and the scheme finally settled upon was something of a compromise. Despite this, however, the garden (as shown in [Figure 3](#)) remains a valued public amenity, having been enclosed, expanded with extra flowerbeds and recently refurbished following a £40,000 donation. See Tom Hulme, ‘Bury 1959: What to Do with the Dosh’, <http://www.historicalpageants.ac.uk/publications/blog/bury-1959-what-do-dosh/> (accessed 8 August 2018).

¹⁰⁹Smith, ‘The “Doing” of Heritage’, 71.

¹¹⁰See, for example, Andrew Swift and Kirsten Elliott, *The Year of the Pageant* (Bath: Akeman Press, 2009), a centenary account of the Bath pageant.

¹¹¹Mark Freeman, ‘A Pageant-Related Visit to Hertford’, 9 June 2014: <http://historicalpageants.ac.uk/publications/blog/pageant-related-visit-hertford/> (accessed 8 August 2018).



Figure 4. Page from Mary Archer's scrapbook, with pictures of herself and Louis Napoleon Parker. Source: Warwickshire County Record Office, CR367/39. Reproduced with permission.

collaboration with the *Redress of the Past* project partners have confirmed the widespread and continuing interest in pageants in many parts of the country.¹¹²

At larger pageants, souvenirs were sold, and proved remarkably popular; there is now a community of collectors who buy and sell pageant memorabilia. Products ranged from programmes and books of words to postcards and commemorative photographs, to glassware and crockery, handkerchiefs and jewellery, and even – as at Carlisle in 1951 – biscuit tins.¹¹³ People kept tickets, their scripts and, in some cases, their costumes; the ephemerality of the performance itself was offset – at least to an extent – by the sale and retention of memorabilia.¹¹⁴ Local newspapers often featured pull-out sections, and usually covered pageants in great detail, sometimes listing the names of all the performers. Individuals also kept their own personalised records, notably scrapbooks. One example was a young girl, Mary Archer, who had a very small speaking part, as one member of a crowd of children, in the Warwick pageant of 1906. (Her sole line, delivered with the other children, was ‘Thank you, Master Oken!’¹¹⁵) She compiled a scrapbook at the time of the pageant, or soon after, and kept it for the rest of her life: it

¹¹²See <http://www.historicalpageants.ac.uk/events/> (accessed 8 August 2018).

¹¹³There is a Carlisle pageant biscuit tin in the possession of a member of the *Redress of the Past* project team.

¹¹⁴On this phenomenon in a contemporary context, see Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 226–7, 237.

¹¹⁵Thomas Oken was a noted Warwick benefactor of the sixteenth century: one important educational function of pageants was to keep alive the memory of the public-spirited notables of the past, with a view to the encouragement of similarly public-spirited actions on the part of present-day members of the local community.

included a large number of photographs, including one of pageant-master Parker, next to which, significantly, Mary placed a picture of herself (see Figure 4).¹¹⁶ She also kept a letter that she received from Parker, containing a poem that anticipated this kind of lifelong memorialisation of pageanting:

Dear little maid, who [stood?] and dreamed,
While kings and queens went glittering by,
Like knights in gorgeous panoply,
And Bishops and Priests, till it really seemed,
As if all England's history
Had stepped from books and painted walls,
From Palaces, Cathedrals, Halls,
On purpose that your eyes might see
Its beauty and its dignity: –
In years to come, when you're old and grey,
You'll look at a faded picture, and say –
With perhaps a tear, and perhaps a sigh –
'That was Elizabeth – this was I!'¹¹⁷

Another pageant scrapbook was kept by Win Scholfield, who was responsible for painting a horse-drawn coach that was used in a scene in the Runnymede Pageant of 1934. Her scrapbook contains photographs of various scenes from the pageant, including several showing the coach, as well as photographs of the pageant-master Gwen Lally and a letter from Lally herself about rehearsal arrangements.¹¹⁸ Yet another example came to light at Bury St Edmunds, where one of our oral history interviewees, Liz Cole, showed us the scrapbook that she had kept since the 1959 pageant.¹¹⁹ These heavily curated and deeply personal mementoes of pageanting, kept for a lifetime and beyond, are strong evidence of the appeal of this form of historical and community engagement, especially to children and young people.

As well as collecting souvenirs, many people who performed in and saw pageants were willing to write to local newspapers about them, often decades after the events themselves. Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, local newspapers carried historical accounts of pageants that had taken place many years before, and these often prompted further recollections from former performers and spectators.¹²⁰ Others wrote in on the anniversaries of notable pageants, and their published memories again emphasise the importance of ideas about 'community'. One correspondent to the *Herts Advertiser* in 1998, remembering the 1948 St Albans pageant (staged when she was aged 10), recalled 'a truly memorable event encapsulating a great sense of community spirit everywhere'.¹²¹

¹¹⁶Warwick pageant scrapbook, Warwickshire County Record Office (WCRO), CR367/39. Despite her very minor part, the pageant obviously made a big impression on Mary and her family. She bequeathed the scrapbook to her sister, who gave it the title 'Sister's Pageant Memories'. Its subtitle, perhaps supplied by Mary herself, was 'Just the Elements of a Memorable Week in Life'.

¹¹⁷Louis Napoleon Parker to Jeannette Mary Archer, 8 October 1906, WCRO, CR367/38.

¹¹⁸Win Scholfield's Runnymede pageant scrapbook, in the authors' possession. We are grateful to Ross Mitchell for sending us this item.

¹¹⁹For the scrapbook and Liz Cole's memories, see 'Tales from the Bury St Edmunds Pageant – (4) Liz Cole', 5 August 2015: <http://historicalpageants.ac.uk/publications/blog/tales-bury-st-edmunds-pageant-4-liz-cole/> (accessed 8 August 2018).

¹²⁰See, for example, *Herts Advertiser*, 1 July 1977, 6, containing recollections of the St Albans pageant 70 years earlier.

¹²¹Audrey Ashby in *Herts Advertiser*, 18 June 1998, 6.

This sense of community should not be simply dismissed as an illusion, as some contemporary critics have suggested.¹²² Like the plays of Ann Jellicoe and others, pageants sometimes provoked ‘confrontation’ within communities,¹²³ but they managed to attract thousands of people, and were evidently remembered with fondness. They could clearly play a role in educational memories, too, as Cannadine et al. have shown.¹²⁴ Performances, often seen as ephemeral in contrast with more tangible manifestations of ‘heritage’,¹²⁵ can live long in the memory and affect both individual and collective futures – precisely as many pageant-masters hoped.

The Winchester pageant of 1908 provides us with a final example. Benson’s spectacular ‘national pageant’ featured more than 2,000 performers, raised £2,000 to help restore the cathedral and played to sell-out crowds, which on opening night numbered 8,000. In some respects, the pageant did not go according to plan. On that first night, according to the local press,

[t]he crush at the gates leading to the ticket office was terrible; women screamed and fainted, and frantically tore their way out of the dense, swaying, pushing, surging mass of humanity behind. When the gates opened the constables were almost overcome, and again around the ticket office the crowd screamed and fought for the little piece of paper which entitled them to admission.¹²⁶

This account dents any image of high Edwardian summer stately decorum that one might associate with the pageantry of the time, and, if this were not enough, then the ‘Russian gun riot’ in the run-up to the pageant dispels the image completely. The riot was precipitated by an attempt by the local authority to remove the railings around a Russian gun captured during the Crimean War, which had become a symbol of working-class patriotism in the city. At the peak of the disturbance, some 10,000 people were assembled, and the pageant headquarters and pageant ground themselves were attacked: one large prop, a Saxon chariot, was thrown into the river. Ayako Yoshino sees the riot as evidence of social divisions in Winchester, resulting in ‘resentment of a pageant designed to raise money not for the poor but for the cathedral’.¹²⁷ Yet, as Paul Readman has shown elsewhere, many working people in Winchester were involved in the preparations for the pageant – fashioning scenery and making shields and spears at local authority workshops, for example – and many others performed in the pageant itself, though admittedly taking less prominent roles.¹²⁸ As with other pageants, Winchester created lifelong memories for those who witnessed it. Sarah Dilcock, aged 11, spent some time there in the run-up to the pageant in the company of her sister and brother-in-law, who were members of Benson’s company. Sarah did not act in the pageant, but her unpublished memoirs, written shortly before her death more than six decades later, describe it as ‘one of the greatest events of my life’.¹²⁹ The pageant

¹²²See, for example, Zygmunt Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001).

¹²³Jellicoe, *Community Plays*, 26.

¹²⁴Cannadine et al., *Right Kind of History*, 88.

¹²⁵Baz Kershaw, ‘Nostalgia for the Future of the Past: Technological Environments and the Ecologies of Heritage Performance’, in Jackson and Kidd, *Performing Heritage*, 123–5.

¹²⁶*Hampshire Independent*, 4 July 1908, 9.

¹²⁷Yoshino, *Pageant Fever*, 237.

¹²⁸Readman, ‘Commemorating the Past’, 100–2.

¹²⁹The Memoirs of Sarah Elsie Dilcock-Innocent’ (unpublished, 1973), 7: copy in the authors’ possession, quoted with the permission of Fiona Grubb.

whetted her interest in the Saxon past, in particular, and she continued to play the pageant music – written specially for the event – ‘for years afterwards, producing a feeling of nostalgia’, although she never visited Winchester again.¹³⁰ As for the earlier disturbances, these also feature in Sarah’s memoirs, but, in her words, ‘what the riot was about I have no idea’.¹³¹ Like many other pageanteers and pageant-goers, her recollections were almost all happy ones. According to her granddaughter Fiona Grubb, ‘[f]or the rest of her life [Sarah] never stopped talking about her time in Winchester. It made such an impression on her’.¹³²

Conclusion

For much of the twentieth century, pageants brought communities together behind performed fabrications of the local past and its folk traditions, linked to wider national narratives. They were educational activities in both their content and organisation, even if historical accuracy was often sacrificed for the sake of dramatic effect. This need not undermine the value of the versions of history told in pageants, however: in a museum theatre context, Jackson has argued that ‘if, in the interests of accessibility and the stirring of curiosity, factual accuracy does sometimes get compromised, this should not in itself be a cause for condemnation’.¹³³ The educational value of pageants, and of drama more widely, was understood not only in terms of content, but also the opportunities for participation that they offered: as one official report noted, participation in drama ‘carries with it those intellectual interests and moral qualities which are developed by the art of acting and all other arts incidental to the production of a play’.¹³⁴ The unrivalled scale and scope of a pageant offered ample opportunities in this respect; indeed, Parker himself held that a pageant at its best ‘becomes a school of Arts and Crafts’.¹³⁵ Taking part in a pageant could have a profound impact on people and places. In a contemporary context, it has been argued, participating in community performance can be ‘a transformative personal and communal journey’,¹³⁶ and this certainly happened through pageants.

Pageants were usually celebratory events, performed as a means of affirming a continuing sense of place, often in the face of rapid and disquieting change. As a result, unlike contemporary versions of educational theatre – in both formal education and heritage settings – they did not aim ‘to unsettle their audiences’ prior assumptions’ and challenge their view of the past.¹³⁷ Rather, they confirmed and strengthened existing loyalties and identities. Yet they should not be seen simply as reactionary or retrogressive, even where they presented an elite-centred or nostalgic view of the past. Coherent local and national identities depend on the persistence of the past in public culture, and of a sense of the continuity of associated traditions, myths and heritage;¹³⁸

¹³⁰Ibid., 42–3.

¹³¹Ibid., 40.

¹³²Fiona Grubb to Paul Readman, 15 June 2018, letter in the authors’ possession, quoted with permission.

¹³³Jackson, *Theatre, Education and the Making of Meanings*, 260.

¹³⁴*The Drama in Adult Education*, 25.

¹³⁵Parker, *Several of My Lives*, 286.

¹³⁶Petra Kupperts and Gwen Robertson, ‘General Introduction’, in *The Community Performance Reader*, ed. Petra Kupperts and Gwen Robertson (London: Routledge, 2007), 3.

¹³⁷Jackson, *Theatre, Education and the Making of Meanings*, 260.

¹³⁸See Anthony D. Smith, *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 142ff.; Anthony D. Smith, ‘Nations and Their Pasts’, *Nations and Nationalism* 2 (1996): 358–65.

crucially, they also depend on popular engagement with that past. Pageantry offered opportunities for such engagement on a mass scale, and as such, although eclipsed today by other manifestations of historical culture, it stands as a powerful reminder of the importance of the past in maintaining a shared understanding of community. The communities in which pageants took place may not always have functioned in the smooth and socially homogenous ways that the organisers hoped, but pageants enlisted many thousands of enthusiastic participants who had a good time and came away with happy memories. Across much of the twentieth century, pageants were a notably successful means of promoting public engagement with the past, and as such, they merit a significant place in the social history of education.

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